
Enclosure and Disclosure

Paul Kockelman

In certain historical and ethnographic contexts, scholars such as Marx and Evans-Pritchard have been able to disclose relatively coherent ensembles of meaningful practices from what at first appear to be simple objects—the commodity in modern capitalist society, or cattle among the Nuer. Around such “objects”—viewed as bundles of social, semiotic, and material relations—are unfolded group-relative modes of experiencing and behaving, thinking and acting, categorizing and evaluating. Indeed, so extensive is the reach of such objects that the ensembles of practices they disclose constitute the figure and ground of social life: space and time, substance and form, quality and quantity, ontology and cosmology. Moreover, in the hands of these devoted theorists, such ensembles of meaningful practices are epistemologically immanent: simultaneously the object interpreted and the method of interpretation. Finally, at least in the work of Marx, disclosure is situated at the intersection of knowledge and power. To paraphrase Francis Bacon—and taking the term *nature* to include “second nature”—if the task of knowledge is to find for a given nature the source of its coming-to-be, the task of power is to superinduce on a given body a new nature (Bacon 2000 [1620]: 102).

Ethnography—and critical theory more generally—is not only a mode of disclosure but also a mode of enclosure. This term has many interrelated meanings. For example, there are enclosures in the everyday sense: not only zoos, cages, museums, and jails but also biological reserves, kraals, and chicken coops (Bacon 2002 [1627]). There is enclosure as aestheticization: to give intelligibility, form, and permanence to things that are otherwise distant, murky, and fleeting (Bakhtin 1990). There is enclosure as *bios*: biography as a kind of interpretive frame that

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gives a human life meaning, coherence, and closure (Arendt 1995). There is enclosure in the sense of physical objectivity: being continuously present to the senses, surrounded by a medium, detachable from context, and portable across contexts (Gibson 1986). There is enclosure as the extension of a network: creating the conditions for scientific objects to reproduce their effects outside the laboratory (Latour 1988). There is enclosure in the sense of scientific objectivity: a form of knowledge that is spatially and temporally portable, so far as it holds good independently of the process of its production (Porter 1995). There is enclosure as articulation: conferring propositional content on an experience, and hence the possibility of truth-value, by means of making an assertion. There is enclosure as entextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990): the process of making signs seem amenable to cross-contextual interpretation. There is enclosure as commoditization: on the one hand, the process in which something is alienated, unitized, quantified, standardized, and priced, and on the other hand, the process through which something is produced, circulated, and consumed. Following Whorf (1956), there is the enclosure of formless substances with substanceless forms, as evinced in any set of measures: pats of butter, bolts of cloth, square meters of space, hours of time, and bricks of gold. There is enclosure as material labor: making products that last beyond the production process itself, such that they may be more widely circulated, and ultimately more highly valued, before being consumed (Smith 1976 [1776]). And finally, following Marx and Foucault, there is the historical phenomenon of enclosure: on the one hand, that process whereby common lands were turned into private property, and peasants became proletariat, and on the other hand, that process whereby such doubly freed persons—from both masters and means of production—were brought into disciplinary institutions, from the workhouse to the asylum.

Various modes of enclosure may therefore be seen as both the condition and consequence of disclosure. That is, knowledge of and power over any given domain is both facilitated by and productive of various forms of enclosure. And, in this vein, ethnography has a relatively precarious position: on the one hand, it seeks to interpret local modes of enclosure and disclosure, and on the other hand, its interpretations at once enclose and disclose.

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